YOUNGMINDS

Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs

Introduction

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is the biggest health crisis for generations, and it is having a devastating impact on the lives of people across the world. The measures that the UK Government is taking to address the crisis – including restrictions on movement and the closure of schools to most students – are absolutely necessary to save lives.

The pandemic is also a mental health risk for our society. The uncertainty, the anxiety, the fear of becoming ill or seeing a loved one become ill, the loss of our normal routines, the difficulties of social connection, and in many cases the disruption to education could have a profound impact on the nation's mental health.

For children and young people who are already struggling with their mental health, this is an extremely difficult time. That is why we carried out a survey with young people with lived experience of mental health problems to find out how the pandemic and the response are affecting them, what their concerns are, what support they are still able to access, and what can be done to support them over the coming months.

Our survey shows that the crisis is indeed affecting young people, for many different reasons and in different ways. It also shows that – despite the immense difficulties – around three-quarters of young people who were accessing mental health support before the restrictions came into place are still currently able to do so, even if this service may now be reduced or adapted.

Professionals who work in the young people's mental health sector – whether for the NHS, privately, through schools, universities, youth clubs, charities or helplines – deserve enormous credit for continuing to provide support where they can. In an unprecedented and totally unexpected situation, they are going to remarkable lengths to reach young people, even though face-to-face contact is now usually restricted and remote support is often challenging.

While we recognise the huge efforts being made, we need to find ways to help those young people who have lost their support – not least because, in many cases, they have also lost many of their coping mechanisms, including contact with friends or routines that help them to manage their conditions. We also know that many young people who previously might not have needed mental health support are likely to do so in future. As the impact of the pandemic and the restrictions on their lives continues to sink in, more young people are going to struggle to cope.

This is a time when we must all pull together, and look out for those who are most at risk in our society. We hope the Government will fully recognise the growing mental health impact that COVID-19 will continue to have on children and young people, and ensure that addressing this is a key component of their response.

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive, YoungMinds

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on the lives of people across the United Kingdom, including millions of children and young people. For those with existing mental health needs, the situation is creating additional anxiety and uncertainty, coupled with increased difficulties in accessing support.

We carried out a survey with 2,111 young people with a history of mental health needs between Friday 20th March (the day that schools closed to most children) and Wednesday 25th March (when there had been a further tightening of restrictions) in order to establish the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and on their ability access to support[i]. We also asked respondents about helpful and unhelpful coping strategies, and for advice to other young people.

This is a snapshot of young people's views and experiences at a particular time, in a rapidly changing situation. The challenges they face, the concerns they have and their ability to access support may change considerably over the coming weeks.

Mental health impact

Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus and the public health measures designed to prevent its spread are having a profound effect on many young people with a history of mental health problems. When asked what impact the pandemic was having:

32% agreed that it had made their mental health much worse

51% agreed that it had made their mental health a bit worse

9% agreed that it made no difference to their mental health

6% said that their mental health had become a bit better

1% said that their mental health had become much better

Many respondents stated that they understood and supported the Government's response – to close schools and universities to most students, encourage social distancing and ban public gatherings – and indeed some were critical of what they perceived as a slow speed of restrictive measures. However, while young people overwhelmingly accepted the response, this did not lessen the impact of the crisis. Many reported increased anxiety, problems with sleep, panic attacks or more frequent urges to self-harm among those who already self-harmed.

[i] 2,111 young people took part in the survey, which was hosted on SurveGizmo between Friday 20th March and Tuesday 24th March 2020 and promoted through advertising on social media and on charity mailing lists. Respondents were young people up to the age of 25 who answered 'yes' to the question 'Have you ever looked for support for your mental health?' and who lived in the UK. The ages of respondents varied from 13-25 and the average age was 16-17. 1,294 had received mental health support in the last three months and were experiencing ongoing mental health difficulties.

Key factors that young people said had affected their mental health include:

Concerns about their family's health

While some media narratives depict young people as unwilling to comply with restrictive measures or insufficiently invested in the health of older generations, respondents frequently discussed their concerns about being responsible for cross-infection. Many respondents were deeply anxious about the health of their family, and about harming those around them by inadvertently spreading the virus. Some young people, including some with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, talked about a fixation with hygiene and a need to remain clean. Several young people who were either key workers themselves, or whose parents were key workers (for example, working in a supermarket), were anxious about the virus spreading in their workplace.

A smaller number of young people, usually with underlying health conditions, expressed concern about their own health.

"I'm constantly worried about my family becoming sick as my mum is high risk."

"It has made my OCD so much worse. I am now washing my hands every five minutes or using hand sanitizer."

"I work in a supermarket so I'm kind of on the front line, I worry about catching it and passing it on to vulnerable family members."

School and university closures

The closure of schools and universities to most students creates uncertainty both in the short term and in relation to educational and employment outcomes in the future. For children who are living in difficult or dangerous situations, the closures may also represent the loss of a safe and stable environment.

Young people were concerned by school and university closures for many reasons:

- Potential loss of contact with friends
- Concerns about how their grades would be assessed or about the impact on their university or career prospects
- Concerns about home learning, both for practical reasons and because of stress related to the pandemic
- Loss of structure that school represents
- Loss of formal or informal pastoral support
- Loss of their 'safe' place away from difficult or dangerous home environments

"I will feel lonely due to the abrupt end at a school I've grown up at. I will be unable to access support."

"My school has been cancelled leaving me with no daily routine. I had only just got back into education and now it's like I have nothing again."

"GCSEs were cancelled and I feel hopeless and like everything I have done was for nothing."

Loss of routine

Many young people manage their mental health through maintaining routines that are being disrupted by the measures to control the pandemic. Respondents were frequently anxious about the impact of not being able to take part in day-to-day activities that they regarded as important coping mechanisms – for example, dance or exercise classes. Many respondents described routine or specific activities as important coping mechanisms. Some were concerned that having far more time at home would mean that they overthought things and were more likely to use negative coping strategies, like self-harm.

"I have an eating disorder, and it has brought up so many urges to relapse to take control. I also can't socialise or play sports so it's really hard to stay well."

"All my plans are cancelled, which means I have nothing to look ahead to and you find yourself trapped in a void of your own thoughts."

Loss of social connection

Many young people were concerned about losing connection with friends, non-immediate family and other trusted adults. This was especially so among those who did not feel confident or comfortable using phones or who had limited access to technology. Some young people missed physical proximity with their friends and felt that talking online was not the same.

"My friends are my lifeline, they help me through so much. Now I can't see them and I don't know who I can go to comfortably to talk to. It's not the same talking on the phone at home with my family around. I'm afraid they'll hear."

"Self-isolating and social distancing was a bad habit I worked really hard to get out of. Now I'm being made to do it and being told it's the right thing to do. It's very confusing and I'm scared of falling back in to that cycle."

"Most of my healthy coping skills revolve around social contact, seeing my friends, going out etc. Social distancing is causing me to isolate myself which is bringing back old emotions but there's no way around it as I'm no longer choosing to isolate myself, I have to."

Other themes cited frequently included:

- Concern about dangerous or crowded home environment
- Concern about family's finances or about losing their own job
- Anxiety about not being able to buy food, or about no longer getting meals at school
- Young people, including those with eating disorders, expressing anxiety about food, amidst food shortages and potential restrictions on exercise
- Young people with ADHD concerned about not being able to go outside as much as they wished to
- Experiencing racism as a result of the pandemic

We also asked young people what their top three concerns were about coping over the next few months. The three most common answers were:

- Isolation / loneliness
- Not having enough food / supplies
- Managing mental health / mental health deteriorating

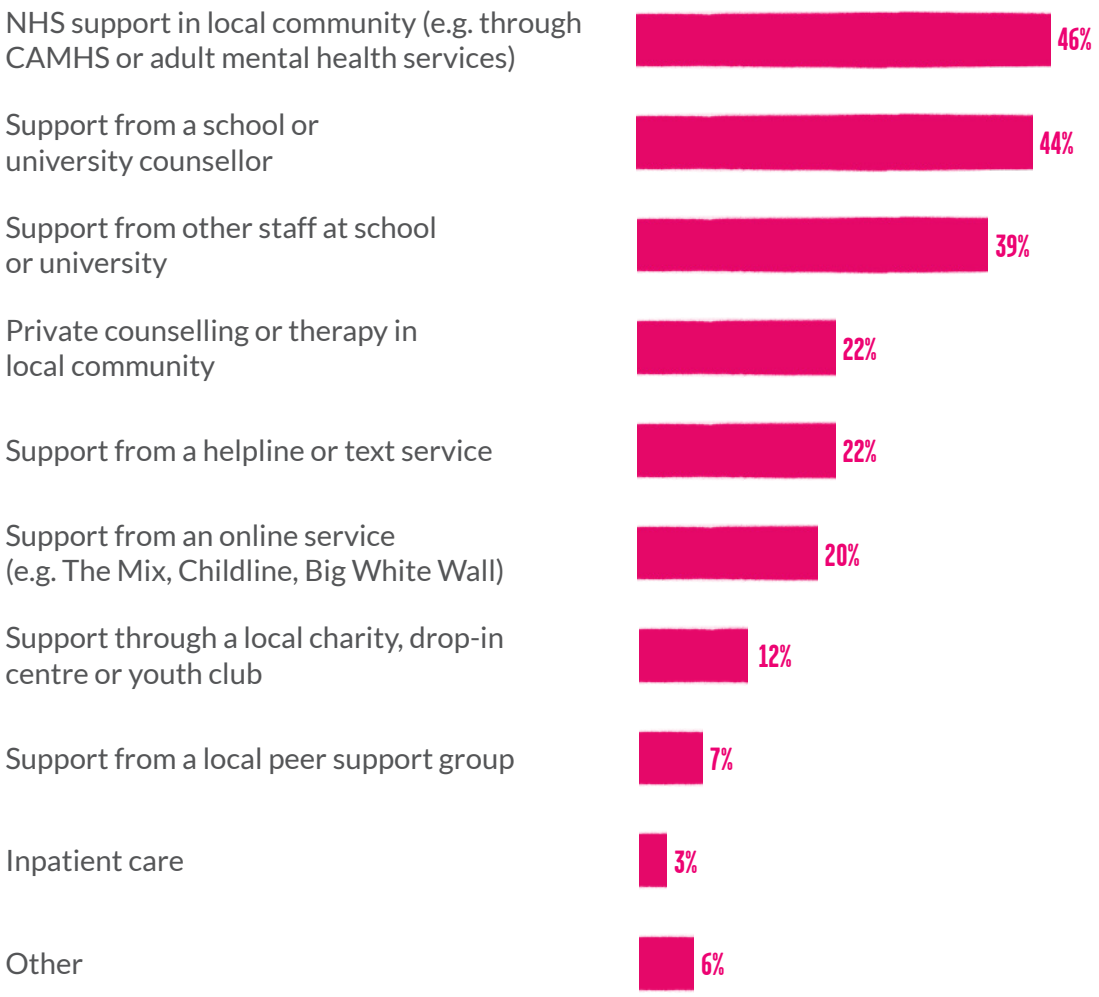
A small number of young people reported that their mental health had improved during the crisis. This was often related to:

- Having a difficult relationship with school – for example, being bullied – and relief that they would no longer have to attend
- Feeling positive about the response – for example, friends proactively contacting them and reminding them that they are valued
- Finding that their own anxiety has a clear focus, and is now shared by other people

"My school shut down. I have been FaceTiming my friends all day and it made me realise I was really loved. Also it has given me time to improve myself and improve skills like playing the piano"

Impact on access to mental health support

Among the respondents to the survey, 1,294 young people had accessed mental health support in the past three months. Types of mental health support they had received included:



We asked these respondents what impact the pandemic had had on their ability to access mental health support.

74% said that they were still able to access some form of mental health support

26% said that they were no longer able to access mental health support

In an extraordinarily difficult situation, professionals working in the mental health sector deserve huge credit for continuing to provide some level of mental health support to almost three-quarters (74%) of young people who were previously accessing services.

NHS workers, private practitioners, school and university counsellors, charities, youth sector services and helplines are all doing their utmost to provide help where they can, often moving their support online in rapidly changing circumstances.

However, a consequence of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions is that around a quarter of young people who were receiving some form of mental health support are no longer accessing it, while many of those who are continuing to get help are not receiving an equivalent level of support.

In many cases, where young people are receiving no support or reduced support, our survey suggests that it is not because none has been offered, but because it is difficult or impossible for them to receive support from home.

This may be because the service is not yet set up to work remotely, because there is not private space in their homes for therapeutic conversations or because they do not believe that digital support will be effective. This situation is likely change over the coming weeks.

Key themes included:

Cancellation of face-to-face support

- Most respondents reported that their counselling and support had either been stopped, or moved online or via phone calls.
- Many young people received support via school or college, and teaching staff as well as counsellors are mentioned frequently as trusted adults that young people are no longer able to talk to easily about how they are feeling
- Peer support groups have been paused
- Many face-to-face GP appointments have been cancelled for the time being
- Respondents reported that they would be unable to attend sessions because either they or their counsellor was in self-isolation

"I can't have face to face contact with the mental health nurse I work with so we can only have short phone conversations, which don't provide as much support and my mental health including anxiety and paranoia has deteriorated."

"Many mental health teams cannot provide support or are limited, and I feel I cannot go to A&E in a mental health crisis."

"Not being in school or youth club, so I have no way of having my meetings with the people who supported me via those locations."

"I usually have a weekly therapist, but my mum has lost her job because of the outbreak, and we can't afford it anymore."

Challenges of remote support

- Where young people continued to access support remotely, some welcomed the efforts that professionals had gone to in order to continue to provide support.
- However, most respondents felt that support by phone or online would be ineffective or less effective than face-to-face support, because of a lack of privacy at home or a fear of their family overhearing the session. In some cases, family relationships are at the centre of young people's therapy, and so it would be difficult to discuss concerns while at home. In other cases, young people said that their families did not know that they were receiving mental health support – and they did not want them find out. Some young people remained more generally anxious about talking on the phone or via video calls.
- Some providers are encouraging young people to have therapy while they are on a walk (for their one permitted piece of exercise per day), in order to ensure they can talk with privacy.
- Some young people who usually access online support feel like it takes longer to get it due to influx of people with mental health needs arising from the COVID-19 crisis.
- Rising demand means that some respondents felt it was harder to get their calls answered when they contacted helplines.

"My panic attacks have come back for the first time in three years and I've found it difficult to sleep and eat well. My counsellor is continuing my weekly sessions online and it's invaluable to have that time to talk through my anxieties and help me rationalise them."

"My next therapy session will be over skype but I am scared because my family will be able to hear."

"Talking over Skype calls makes me anxious and so I have stopped the occasional therapy sessions I had."

"All my appointments have been cancelled. I can't access help at school. Helpline waiting times are really long."

Lack of clarity

- Some young people reported that they hadn't yet been told where to get support now they're losing their usual route to access support
- Some young people reported the wider issue of being left without support after course of counselling ends – a challenge that pre-dates the coronavirus.

"My Eating Disorder team has changed just as I was getting comfortable with it, no more face to face appointments, everything has fallen apart."

Coping and self-managing

With reduced access to mental health support, there will undoubtedly be a huge need for young people – and adults – to find ways to look after their own wellbeing and mental health over the coming weeks and months.

We asked respondents what they found helpful and unhelpful for their mental health:

Activity	% found helpful	% found unhelpful
Face-to-face calls with friends	72%	3%
Watching TV / films	72%	6%
Exercise	60%	7%
Learning new skills	59%	4%
Reading books	55%	6%
Gaming	49%	5%
Face-to-face calls with family	47%	8%
Spending time with family	48%	23%
Breathing techniques	38%	14%
Social media	31%	36%
Reading / watching the news	13%	66%

Other techniques young people suggested as helpful for their mental health included: writing and journaling; spending time with pets; playing or listening to music; watching YouTube; being outdoors in nature; and creating and sticking to a routine.

These results suggest that social connection with friends is often the most helpful method of managing and maintaining mental health[ii]. Activities that young people enjoy – like watching films, reading or gaming – are also likely to be beneficial. Exercise is also important, and is likely to become increasingly so, given the limitations on day-to-day movement now imposed.

The activity reported as least helpful was reading or watching the news. While young people may want or need information about what is happening, there was a widespread recognition that knowing every detail and following every update made people feel worse and less in control. Social media was perceived as both positive and negative – an important means of staying in touch with friends, but also a source of anxiety, especially around the news.

[ii] Reaching out to friends via video call was the answer most frequently described as "very helpful"

Additional mental health support

We asked respondents what mental health support would be most useful to them at the moment. The most common responses were:

1. **Face-to-face therapeutic or emotional support.** Young people commonly wanted a continuation of existing support, and often specifically face-to-face support. More generally, respondents expressed a wish to have someone to talk to and just to listen. While it is clear that face-to-face support has severe public health risks and it is therefore understandable that it is extremely difficult to manage, it is important to plan ahead for a resumption of services when it is possible.

"Face to face sessions. I know they can't be done at the moment but they only work for me."

"Continuing of what was being previously given with more focus on techniques to adjust to the sudden changes."

"Just someone to talk to and support me through this very difficult time. Advice on how to deal with all the different things coming at me all at once. I like control and I hate uncertainty."

2. **Online and digital support in whatever format or medium.** In the absence of face-to-face support, respondents highlighted the importance of online and digital tools to facilitate ongoing and existing support. However, some respondents highlighted technological challenges as well as personal preferences and effectiveness.

"Online chats, more positive news outlets, reassurance from others."

"Video call support / more frequent phone call or online support."

"I've also tried online therapy after self-referring myself but it was very unhelpful for me."

3. **Self-help techniques and coping strategies and mechanisms.** This includes:

    - Calming techniques and strategies
    - General activities highlighting the importance of healthy distractions

"Guides on how to remain calm and more at peace with the uncertainty of everything."

"Information and tools about how to manage the symptoms of anxiety that I am experiencing - like places I can go to know how to control my breathing, or actual techniques that could work at calming me down."

"TV programmes on mental health and ways to keep calm, so that my whole family would see them."

4. **Information, advice and guidance more generally.** Media in general was considered to be a negative influence, because of the dominance of negative stories, and respondents wanted to see more positive news. This extends, but isn't limited to:

    - COVID-19 and mental health-specific advice
    - Practical information and advice related to the outbreak locally
    - School / education advice
    - Positive news

"Some information about coronavirus which is easy to read and understand…Strategies or tools which will help me to manage my worries and anxiety around coronavirus…Ideas of things to do on top of my college work to keep me occupied and ensure that I'm not bored… News reminders of when changes are made around coronavirus and things start to improve."

"A clean break from the news, but that seems almost impossible in the current situation."
"News or social media influencers posting positive stuff about progress happening during the pandemic to contain it."

5. **Other key themes featuring less prominently included financial support, how to help others and the importance of family and friends.**

"Resources on how to cope with uncertainty, alongside ideas for day to day activities and how to help others, particularly vulnerable people. Helping others might help me feel more fulfilled and purposeful."

Messages to other young people

Despite the extraordinary challenges many young people with mental health needs will face over coming months, most were keen to share advice, support and solidarity with others. We will continue to share supportive messages, blogs, videos and advice through YoungMinds channels and through public campaigns wherever possible.

"I think the best thing to do is see this time as a breather from life. Do the things you've been putting off because you've been busy, spring clean your home, sort through your bedroom, create a new safe space. Move between rooms in the house instead of just isolating yourself in your room. Schedule facetime calls daily / weekly with family & friends. Do exercise / dance video tutorials on YouTube."

"If you have friends to speak to then speak to them and let them know you are thinking of them. Even just a couple of update texts from my friend made me feel so much better. And work with those you live with if at all possible to make the living situation as good as possible."

"No matter what happens, we can survive this. It may not seem so now, but I promise you it will be okay. Talk to someone if you feel you need to: there is no shame in asking for help, especially during a crisis."

"It's going to be hard, but we can make it through this."

Conclusion

This survey was carried out as young people reached a turning-point: while the survey was open, many young people went from attending school as normal one week to being at home, barely able to go out, the next. We will carry out future surveys to assess the ongoing impact of the pandemic and social isolation on young people's mental health.

The survey was also – inevitably – less likely to reach some of the most vulnerable young people, who have limited access to digital technology.

However, there are some clear conclusions. Firstly, there is now likely to be an increased level of need among young people who were already accessing mental health services. For these young people, there is a fear that their needs could escalate during this period of self-isolation, so it is crucial that the NHS and other services continue to find ways to get support to them throughout this challenging time.

There will be many young people who are struggling with their mental health, but have not yet managed to access support, and others who are experiencing anxiety for the first time as a result of the pandemic. These young people need to know where to go for help which remains available during this time, with clear signposting and access to digital support. Families, carers and teachers will be a crucial source of support for young people, but they too will need help to play this part.

We call on the Government to acknowledge the importance of children and young people's mental health during the pandemic. They must include measures to tackle to young people's mental health needs at this time as an integral part of their response to the crisis:

- Ensure that the NHS, schools, charities and other providers have the funding and resources they need to deliver services, including digital, virtual, text-based and telephone therapies, to children, young people, parents and carers
- Enable a coordinated effort across the NHS, schools and other providers to support those young people who are hardest to reach, who are unable to access remote support, or who do not find it helpful for their needs.
- Prioritise clear and ongoing public health messaging aimed at children, young people and families about what they can do to look after their wellbeing and mental health.

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